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ABSTRACT

The Northwest Forensic Conference (NFC) was created in response to decreasing budgets and fewer schools participating in forensics. The basis of the NFC is the designated tournament and yearly divisional sweepstakes awards. Special features of designated tournaments include oral critiques and seminars on forensic issues. Initially, it was assumed that the NFC could stabilize and expand the size of some local tournaments and would provide a competitive alternative to these events for programs in the area. NFC tournaments have in fact been larger than local tournaments in previous years, and NFC contestants have competed successfully in the National Debate Tournament and sweepstakes competitions. Based on the NFC experience, several conclusions about the advisability of the designated tournament format may be made. First, this format is generally effective in providing a stable and reasonably predictable tournament size. Second, the form is educationally defensible. Finally, this format demonstrates the willingness of forensics educators to adapt to changing conditions. (HTH)

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The Designated Tournament: A Northwest Experiment

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The Northwest Forensic Conference was created to respond to some immediate and sometimes challenging concerns facing forensics teachers in the Northwest. Shrinking tournament sizes; the emerging priority of qualifying students for the NIET and the omnipresent desire to win CEDA points all led several forensic directors to question the traditional forensic assumption that the more tournaments that are offered in a season the better off the activity is and to try consciously to build a new tournament structure in the Northwest which emphasized fewer and hopefully larger tournaments.

This paper describes the assumptions, motivations, and mechanisms which guided the creation and maintenance of a regional forensic championship in the Pacific Northwest. The continuing climate of decreasing budgets and fewer schools participating in forensics makes the option of a regional championship a viable alternative to the existing tournament season model.

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While discussion of the 'state of forensics' is an on-going subject of any coaches party worth its salt, serious discussion of the. 'state of Northwest forensics' began at various social and other gatherings of Northwest forensic coaches during the 1982-83 season. The concerns of these teachers was many-fold. First, there was a genuine feeling that NDT debate was in serious difficulty in the Northwest. The number of schools fielding NDT teams had declined radically in recent years. During that season (1982-83) only three schools participated in the District Qualifier and the junior division of NDT was almost non-existent. Second, there was the belief that competition in the Northwest was becoming a two-tier system, with 'large schools' able to compete in large tournaments held outside of the area and 'small schools' who did not have that opportunity. Competition for berths to the NIET; NDT, and the CEDA sweepstakes was increasingly being concentrated in a small percentage of the schools competing in forensics. Third, and finally, the concern was expressed that the forensic season was too long and the activity would be better served if there were fewer tournaments and the season ended earlier.

The result of these informal discussions was a more formal discussion of the state of Northwest forensics at the annual meeting of the Northwest Communication Association at Coeur

d'Alene, Idaho, in April of 1982. At a program organized by Dr. Darrell Scott of Gonzaga, several people presented papers attempting to analyze the existing state of affairs and offer possible solutions for strengthening Northwest forensics. A strong feeling that increased emphasis of the 'regional' aspects of forensics would be the most appropriate and desirable means of alleviating the troublesome problems that many perceived.

After the presentation of the program, several forensic directors and interested colleagues continued the meeting informally and the idea of a Northwest Forensic Championship first took shape. At that time it was decided that a summer meeting of the District II NDT Committee might be a good place to organize this still embryonic notion into some tangible form. District II Chair Larry Richardson organized this meeting which was held in Tacoma, Washington during the last weekend of July. Invitations to the meeting were sent to all the forensic directors in the Northwest.

Prior to the July meeting, Michael Bartanen (Pacific Lutheran University), Kevin Twohy (Carroll College), and David Frank (University of Oregon) formed a highly ad hoc committee to draw up a working set of procedures and by-laws to present to their colleagues attending the Tacoma meeting. These by-laws became the operating procedures for the new organization.

The basis of the Northwest Forensic Conference (NFC) is the designated tournament and yearly divisional sweepstakes awards. The NFC designates four tournaments, held once a month in October, November, January, and February, as NFC tournaments. The results of the tournaments are compiled through a sweepstakes system.

Designated tournaments consist of eight round debate tournaments and individual events tournaments consisting of 3 constant events and other rotating NIET events. Each tournament offers junior, senior, and novice divisions in both debate and selected individual events. All 10 NIET events are held in at least two of the four NFC tournaments. Each tournament is free to have either additional individual events or additional debate divisions.

There are several special features of designated tournaments. First, oral critiques in junior and novice divisions are encouraged and time is built into the schedule to facilitate the critiques. Students may not double-enter in these divisions and are asked to stay for the entire round to participate in the critique session. Second, each designated tournament sponsors a seminar on some forensic issue. The seminars are designed to cover subjects that interest both teachers and students. The subjects of the seminars have been wide-ranging:

Gonzaga, 1982 - Lew Wilson & Larry Kraft, (EWU) discussed the National Discussion Contest, what it is, how to enter, and the techniques they used to win the event in 1982.

Oregon, 1982 -Suzanne Larson, Craig Schultz (Humboldt) & Sean O'Rourke (Oregon) discussed techniques in oral interpretation contests.

PLU, 1983 -David Frank, Robert Withycombe (Whitman) and Steven Hunt (Lewis & Clark) responded to issues and controversies in forensics discussed by students in a forensic event ("Forensic Criticism") offered at the University of Oregon tournament.

Whitman, 1983 -Withycombe and Frank discussed a content analysis of individualevents ballots written during a contestant-critiqued round.

Lewis & Clark, 1983 - Marion Rossi (WOSC), Darrell Scott and Kevin Twohy spoke on "Forensic Revival," ways of stimulating forensic activities.

UPS, 1984 - Michael Dugaw (Lower Columbia), Withycombe, Larry Richardson, and Kristine Davis (UPS) discussed "Ethics" in Forensics.

The fourth tournament holds an NFC membership meeting rather than a seminar. The final special feature of the NFC tournaments is the assessment of $.25 per student to finance NFC activities. This money is used to purchase the sweepstakes trophies for the overall NFC Championship as well as covering some of the incidental costs of mailing out tournament results and sweepstakes standings after each NFC event.

Sweepstakes competition is divided into three categories. Division I Sweepstakes is for four-year colleges who attended more than eight tournaments in the preceding forensic season. Division II Sweepstakes is for colleges attending fewer than eight tournaments, and Division III Sweepstakes is the Community College championship. The choice of eight tournaments was

pragmatic as eight seemed to be the dividing line between the larger and the smaller schools and seemed to create approximately equally sized categories for the four-year schools.

At the annual meeting after the first NFC season several changes were made in the by-laws. The most significant change was the designation of tournament dates for NFC tournaments so that other tournaments, such as high school tournaments, could be scheduled to avoid conflicts. The NFC is generally committed to geographically rotating the tournaments and by vote of the membership determined that only one NFC tournament a season can take place on a Friday-Saturday-Sunday schedule. The other three must be Thursday-Friday-Saturday tournaments. This does tend to influence the location of tournaments as some schools are unable to host Thursday events. There was a strong feeling among NFC members that saving Sunday was more crucial than the difficulty that Thursday tournaments created for tournament hosts.

Each NFC tournament includes whatever unique features the local host wishes and the host determines the events, conflict patterns, and make-up of the tab room staff. The tournament host is also free to set fees although NFC tournament fees have been fairly consistent, and compared to fees charged in other parts of the country a real bargain!

I now turn to a brief analysis of the effects of the NFC concept on Northwest forensics.

The initial assumption was that the NFC could stabilize and expand the size of some local tournaments; would strengthen preparation and success in the NIET, NDT and CEDA; and would provide a competitive alternative to these events for programs in the area.

1. TOURNAMENT SIZE. With one exception, NFC tournaments have in fact been larger than local tournaments in previous years.

SCHOOLS ATTENDING NFC TOURNAMENTS, 1982-1984

Tournament	# of Schools	Outside Schools?
Gonzaga, 10/82	25	yes
Oregon, 11/82	30	yes
PLU, 1/83	31	yes
Western Wash. 3/82	17	no
Whitman, 10/83	22	yes
Lewis & Clark, 11/83	27	yes
Puget Sound, 1/84	27	yes

Attendance by schools outside the Northwest is partially a function of the location of the tournament but having a designated tournament probably does encourage some attendance from outside schools by insuring a predictably large enough tournament to justify attendance. Using size as a criteria, the

NFC has proven to be a modest success.

2. NORTHWEST SUCCESS. It probably would be dangerous to draw a causal link between the NFC concept and success of students in the NIET, NDT, and CEDA sweepstakes, but there must be at least some correlation between the NFC and the fact that Northwest programs did exceptionally well, especially at the NIET and in the final CEDA sweepstakes competition during 1982-83. There is no doubt a causal relationship in the CEDA sweepstakes, as there were virtually no eight round tournaments before the advent of the NFC. More students probably attended the NIET because of the at-large qualifications achieved through these tournaments.

3. COMPETITIVE ALTERNATIVE. It is difficult to speculate on this factor. From a personal perspective, students in my program were enthusiastic about NFC competition and anxious to do well, even though we were considerably behind the sweepstakes leader in Division I. This factor will probably take longer to assess and probably can only be measured qualitatively as one possible factor in maintaining viable forensic programs in the region.

Finally, we should consider an overall assessment of the designated tournament concept and possible improvements in its functioning.

1. It is not yet clear whether the NFC has done anything to

preserve NDT debate in the long-term. The number of schools fielding policy debate teams continues to decline. While there has been a junior division of policy debate offered at each of the NFC tournaments the number has never reached a "critical mass" of 12-15 teams that may be necessary to consider the division a truly competitively viable event. This has led to the occasional need to collapse divisions for at least a round or two, which probably discourages junior division competitors. There is consideration being given to ploys such as "advance notification of affirmative cases," or "approved case areas" at NFC tournaments, to strengthen policy debate by easing the research and analytic burdens on the students, but the long-term vitality of NDT in the Northwest is still questionable. It is a safe claim, however, that the NFC has stabilized competition in policy debate in the short term.

2. It is also not yet clear whether the NFC has an identity in itself or whether it is just another tournament. The ultimate success of the NFC can only come when there is status attached to doing well in the competition. One effect of the NFC has been to decrease the size of other local tournaments, an effect we all must view with mixed feelings. On the one hand, fewer tournaments means greater ability to conserve scarce resources. On the other, fewer tournaments means less pluralism in the activity, and the loss of the "unique" features of many of our

tournaments that have provided interest and fun to our students.

Possibly sponsoring a Northwest Championship tournament at the end of the forensic season might be a method of accentuating the NFC concept. It is also possible that time might be another factor in improving the prestige of the championship, particularly if there are fewer local tournaments and more need to conserve money by attending fewer tournaments with more students.

While there is always room for change and improvement, no real drastic changes are anticipated for 1984-85. The NFC is still in the consolidation phase, where we are still assessing the effects of the concept on the activity in this region.

Should others use the designated tournament format? Other parts of the country have already experimented with variations of the designated tournament concept. There are, for example, designated tournaments for junior policy debate in the Southwest and Rocky Mountain regions. Based on the Northwest experience, several conclusions about the advisability of the designated tournaments may be made.

1. The designated tournament format is generally effective at providing a stable and reasonably predictable tournament size. Most every active Northwest forensic program attends every NFC tournament. This predictability allows reasonable scheduling of

events to enhance the ability of a forensic program to plan for particular tournaments and budget accordingly.

2. The designated tournament format is educationally defensible. The NFC designated tournaments seek to be more than just another forensic tournament, but places where oral critiques for inexperienced speakers and debaters can be encouraged; where seminars on intellectual and pedagogical issues can be discussed with input from students; and where experimentation can be encouraged.

3. The designated tournament format demonstrates the willingness of forensics educators to "light a single candle" rather than "forever cursing the darkness." The vitality of any activity is shown through the willingness of its participants to adapt to changing conditions and change to fit the times. The greatest success of the Northwest Forensic Conference comes from the ability of highly diverse forensic programs to compromise their individual interests in deference to the common good of their neighbors. Northwest forensic programs each reap something different from their participation in the association, preserving the uniqueness and individuality of these programs.

The designated tournament format is an innovation well worth considering.